Campbell University Connections
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People are curious about clergy. Even people who are not particularly church-oriented regard ministers and priests as curiosities. They think we are somehow fundamentally different from everybody else; that we are untouched by the normal matters of life that occupy most people, and that we just might have inside knowledge of some sort or another, a straight-line communication link with God. So we learn to be a little guarded. We learn how to avoid awkward situations and conversations. A particularly vulnerable situation occurs on airplanes. We learn to sit down and quickly open a book – not the bible, or a magazine – not the Christian Century – in order not to give away our identity and to single-mindedly immerse ourselves in it to ward off unwelcome interruption. But sometimes it happens in spite of our efforts. Our seat mate will not be deterred and cheerfully comments on the weather, the possibility of a flight delay, his or her preferences in airlines, his or her destination, what he/she does for a living, and finally, inevitably it comes: "And what do you do?" "I'm in sales" works sometimes, or "I work for a multinational corporation" is not far from the truth. Lying is always risky, however. Distinguished historian Martin Marty remembers the time he was on a particularly long flight to Australia and wanted more than anything, privacy and quiet to work on the paper he was to deliver. It happened almost as soon as he took his seat. "What do you do?" Marty says he decided to say something esoteric so as to cut off the conversation before it started. "I'm a neurosurgeon," he said. "Wonderful," replied his seatmate, "so am I."

What people really want to know is how we got into this business. "What made you decide to be a minister?" They expect, of course, that we have had a profound mountaintop religious experience, a voice in the night, a lightning bolt from heaven. Some do, by the way, and I in no way disparage those experiences. It simply never happened that way with me, nor has it for many, maybe even most of us. We struggle with the matter of what to do with our one and only life just like everybody else.

Immanuel Kant said there are three great questions that everybody has to answer in some way.

What can I know?

What may I hope?

and, What ought I to do? – the vocational question. And so some thoughts on Kant's great personal question – through the lens of my experience and a look at what the Christian tradition and scripture have to say.

I was born into an average Presbyterian family…which means we went to church every Sunday but we didn't get too excited about it. I attended Sunday School and a pathetic attempt at a youth group: 5 or 6 of us showed up on Sunday night and sang a few hymns, the minister talked to us and we all went across the street for cherry cokes. Presbyterians have been called "God's Frozen People" and that describes us. We lived beside a big Baptist family: they were not frozen. They were hot. They went to church twice on Sunday and Wednesday night and to multiple revival meetings during the year. They were all musicians and evening entertainment was singing hymns around the piano, with two, sometimes three trumpets as well. Before the days of air conditioning, when all the windows were open, we got to enjoy the show as well – although on occasion my father found it irritating and it did disrupt our chosen entertainment, which was listening to the Pittsburgh Pirates on the radio. I went to the Baptist Church with them in the evening, BYPU, then an evening prayer service. BYPU was lively, lots of games – Bible memorization that I, frankly, was pretty good at – and loved competing against and defeating my Baptist buddies. They had food, hayrides, and – an abundance of cute girls. My somber Calvinism began to soften.

On the other side was a big Catholic family – the Shaugnessys – with kids my age. We played in the alley behind our houses and occasionally a theological debate broke out about who's church was the best – who was saved and who was not. They only thing the Catholics and Baptists agreed on was that the Presbyterians were going to hell. I was doomed.

All the while I found myself drawn to church: interested in what happened there. And when a new minister came, with a Yale education and began to preach sermons about racial justice, and ecumenical relations and took swipes from our pulpit at Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anti-communist hysteria – he not only angered some of his parishioners – but hooked me. I had never thought of religion as having anything to do with what was happening in the world. My Baptist friends seemed to care deeply only about not drinking or smoking – or not even thinking about sex – which I found quite impossible not to do.

That's a lot more than you need to know – but, as I look back, it did plant and nurture in me seeds of curiosity and inquiry that continued when I went to college. I was a Government major, thought I might go to law school. I did everything possible to avoid the pre-theological students – who seemed a bit odd to me. When graduation came, I had no idea what to do: Law School, Marine Crops, Job? My advisor had a suggestion. He said, "John, you are asking big, important questions – about life and meaning and purpose and what to do with the rest of your life. Why don't you take some time off and for a year or two pursue those questions. Trust me: you will never have an opportunity to do that again. Why don't you apply to the Divinity School of the University of Chicago?" "Divinity School?" I asked. "I

don’t want to be a minister!” “Oh, they don’t care about that at Chicago,” he said, which turned out not to be entirely accurate. “I think you can probably get a fellowship, and they will teach you to think.”

So that is what I did and that is what happened. I encountered a world I had not known existed: religious scholarship: religious inquiry: worldly religion which cared about the arts, popular culture, politics, economics, justice, and peace. There was one close call along the way: a very narrow miss. After one year, we were married with a baby (people used to do insane things like that in their early twenties) and I concluded it was time to find something to do to earn a little money. I looked at alternatives and found one that caught my imagination: a new doctoral program at Johns Hopkins in Educational Management. Two – three years: all expenses and a stipend. So I applied and a recruiter flew out from Baltimore to interview me. We met in the United Airlines passenger lounge at Midway Airport. What I recall about the interview is that my mind began to wander and I started to watch planes landing and taking off. When it was over I was absolutely confident that we were on our way to Baltimore and a new future. The letter arrived in a few days. “Dear Mr. Buchanan: Thank you for your interest. We do not think you are a good fit for the program. Good luck with your future.” I could not believe my eyes. I had never been turned down for anything: had always succeeded in what I ventured. I was devastated. At the bottom of the page, the interviewer added a hand-written note: “Mr. Buchanan: You seemed distracted during our conversation. My advice to you is to think again about your vocational interests and choices. Kind regards.”

Well – I have concluded that the experience was my call to ministry: a huge “No,” a door closing – forcing more struggle and discernment. Not long afterward, I saw a notice on the Divinity School bulletin board for a position as part-time student pastor in a small town south of Chicago: $50 a week and free use of a parsonage. So – of all things – without the slightest idea about what I was getting into – but desperately needing that $50 a week and rent-free house – I applied, and for some reason that God alone could know – they voted me in and, quite simply, I fell in love with the church and with ministry.

You know, we sons and daughters of the Protestant Reformation have a unique and very important and, I would add, under-appreciated notion of Vocation – or Calling, which is what the word vocation means. Prior to the 16th century and still today, many people simply assume that clergy alone are called to their vocation. In fact “to have a calling” meant to be a minister or priest. Everyone else was left up to their own devices to figure out what to do with their lives. Martin Luther taught that everyone has a calling: that God calls, not only clergy, but teachers and doctors, lawyers and engineers, ditch diggers and dish washers, police and fire fighters. God gives each of us gifts and abilities and interest and passions and no job or

profession is holier or better than any other. Contemporary author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner said it memorably: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Chicago Cubs great Ernie Banks died last week as I was preparing for my time at Campbell. (In fact, his funeral Saturday was in the church I served for 26 years, the Fourth Presbyterian Church or Chicago). He was from very humble beginnings and rose to the top of his profession because of his extraordinary athleticism. He hit 512 home runs, was the National League MVP twice – playing for miserable teams and was elected to the Hall of Fame on the first ballot. Ernie Banks exuded joy and gratitude for the gift of life and will be remembered for saying on a sunny afternoon at Wrigley Field: “It’s a beautiful day for a ball game! Let’s play two!” When he died I thought about words Olympic runner Eric Liddell said when asked about his decision to forgo theological seminary in order to compete in the Olympics. “God made me fast and when I run I gave him glory.” Ernie Banks was one of those extraordinary athletes and human beings who eloquently illustrate the Biblical affirmation that when we exercise our God-given gifts, we do, in fact, glorify God.

The Christian story begins simply when a young man one day makes a vocational decisions, leaves his home, sets out on an unlikely adventure. He’s about 30 years old, working in a carpenter shop, supporting his widowed mother and younger brothers and sisters and one day announces he’s leaving the comfort of his home and the comfortable daily routine to follow where he believes God is calling him. It happens again not long after as he walks along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew and says “Follow me” and “they leave their nets and followed.” And then two more, James and John, in a fishing boat with their father: “Follow me” and they drop their nets and follow.

I have told you a lot of my story. Your story is being written right now. Now is the time of discernment, a time to weigh options – a time to discover where your deepest gladness is and how it might intersect with the world’s deep needs.

Some may decide that it requires a decision to go to seminary and become a clergyperson. But not everyone. In fact that would be an unmitigated disaster. God needs faithful physicians and nurses, bookkeepers and sanitation workers. God needs artists and athletes, homemakers and homebuilders.

At some point each of us listens for and hears a voice and says “Yes.”

Sometimes you don’t know where it will lead. That’s the way it is in the Bible. God calls and for some reason men and women stop what they are doing and walk into an unknown future. In fact, that’s what the Bible

calls faith: not believing certain ideas to be true, but getting up and following where God is calling. Please notice that when Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John, they were not struggling with vocation, or praying, or discussing anything. They were in a fishing boat working and Christ came to them there.

So God comes to you and me, in the events and relationships and challenges of our daily lives. Not just to clergy. Notice that there are no priests or ministers among the first Christians – just men and women, called to be disciples to get up and follow.

God, by the way, does not force the issue. In God's good grace we are free to ignore the call of God, free to not hear, free to spend our lives avoiding it, running from it. God will not coerce but, let me assure, neither will God give up, but will continue to pursue you, encounter you, address you, call you to become what you were created to be. God knows, many of us try to avoid it. But God never stops calling, urging, prodding, nagging until we finally say yes.

Now it is a cardinal rule of preaching and public speaking never to quote poetry, and if you must, do not ever read a poem in its entirety. But I'm retired and I'm not all that likely to be invited back to Campbell University, so I'm going to do it – read the best poem I know about vocation. It's by Mary Oliver and it's called "The Summer Day"

> Who made the world?
> Who made the swan, and the black bear?
> Who made the grasshopper?
> This grasshopper, I mean-
> the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
> the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
> who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
> who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
> Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
> Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
> I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
> I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
> into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
> how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
> which is what I have been doing all day.
> Tell me, what else should I have done?
> Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
> Tell me, what is it you plan to do
> with your one wild and precious life?